

# *Political Solidarity: A Must for Democracy*

**B**elgium is suffering from a lack of political solidarity. This has been strongly illustrated by recent events. Once again, at the Council of Europe, French speaking politicians disparaged a number of decisions of the Flemish Parliament and the Flemish government. The United Nations as well have been recently involved in a similar process. These are disquieting facts.

Reasonable and fair Flemish stances have been constantly associated with extreme rightwing ideas, as we already stated in the first Gravensteen manifesto. This uncritical assumption is creating a climate in which the Flemish people is depicted as intolerant. Some French speaking Belgians are happy because nowadays foreign countries are thinking that “Flanders is racist”. As if this weren’t a racist thought in its own right. Such practices are corrupting the relationship between the Flemish and the French speaking citizens.

## *International rules of play*

A consistent application of European principles would particularly confirm the Flemish position. In today’s Europe a border can no longer be considered as a barrier nor as the location of a battlefield. The internal borders of Europe should rather be considered as *rules of play*. When someone leaves Liège in the direction of Aachen, or Kortrijk in the direction of Paris he will, after crossing the state border, indeed be confronted with a new language

and culture, but luckily enough no longer with a different world or a different Europe.

Today the French possess rights in Germany. Such as all EU citizens they enjoy the protection of European laws and treaties. There are allowed to dwell, work, study and live there. But at the same time they have obligations. They are supposed to respect the language and culture of the country that is offering them its hospitality. Certain rules of play do exist: every time you cross the border you are entering a new square of a collective game.

The Gravensteen group starts from a conditional faith in the irreversibility of the unification of Europe. Today’s Europe isn’t perfect yet. But is also is no longer the playing ground of a Bismarck or a Napoleon III. If the nineteenth century version of the nation state has been superseded, then this ought to apply to Belgium as well. All the Gravensteen group asks for is that in our country as well the European, hence international laws be applied. A part of these rules of law is the principle of territoriality as the political foundation of a peaceful cohabitation in a federal structure. But the respect for the majority rule is also a part of these rules, and equally the political responsibility of the rulers for their actual policy (“no taxation without representation”).

## *The “Iron Rhine”*

It is our endeavour to finally put an end to the narrowly national approach of our problems by the French speaking Belgians. The fact that a percentage

of the Flemish does not join us in our search for a democratic and European approach remains a problem. But one cannot seriously continue to uncritically defend the Belgian nation, while at the same time blaming others for their nationalism.

Raising the issue of democratic deficiency in Belgium is the opposite of “Flemish navel-gazing”. The more one studies the neighboring countries, the more obvious it becomes that the fundamental principles of a fully developed democratic federalism are not being applied in our country. One of these principles is political solidarity. Solidarity supersedes self-interest, as we wrote in the second Gravensteen manifesto. Political solidarity entails among other things that politicians from one region of a country abstain from wilfully acting against the interests of another region.

One illustration of such behavior is the case of the “Iron Rhine”. For years the Flemish government has been laboriously negotiating with the Netherlands regarding the railway connection of the port of Antwerp with the German Ruhr area. The section did not run over Walloon territory nor was any financial contribution expected from Wallonia. Nevertheless the then prime minister of the Walloon region, Elio di Rupo, informed the provincial government of Maastricht (The Netherlands) that in his opinion the entire project was “a waste of money”. Rightly the ministers of the Flemish socialist party (sp.a) called this vision “unheard of, inconsistent and stupid”. Whoever does not respect the elementary principles of political solidarity is himself undermining the living together in Belgium as a federal state.

### *Vacuum of power*

In Belgium the development of democracy has been countered for tens of years. Today it is part of the political game not to respect the rule of majority. French speaking politicians go up the wall when the

Flemish use their majority in parliament to change an electoral law. However, according to the Constitution, there are fully entitled to do so. On the other hand the French speaking demand that the members of the majority in a *faciliteitengemeente* (a city or village in Flanders where the French speaking enjoy certain linguistic rights) acquire the right to decide for the annexation with Brussels, although there exists no constitutional ground for such a decision. Even a democratic decision such as the Flemish “housing code” (that stipulates that people who want to join a social housing project ought to learn a minimal amount of functional Dutch) is vigorously represented as a method of coercion by a racist authority.

As a result we have landed in an unprecedented crisis. The majority is unable to realize its democratic vision of a policy for the future. It is constantly being blocked by the minority, which is nevertheless largely protected by law. The separation of powers is no longer at issue, since there no longer is power, but an ever more alarming vacuum of power. Questioning this version of Belgium seems to us an act of democratic resistance.

### *Reconstructing democracy*

The awesome task of this government consists not only in the development of good management, but first of all in the reconstruction of democracy. This will only succeed if the importance of a number of rules has been accepted. The acknowledgment of the principle of territoriality. The appreciation, in good faith, of the democratic rules of play in Belgian politics. The respect of the majority rule. The responsibility of the different governments for their own policy, which should result in a large fiscal autonomy.

Whoever wants to secure a future for Belgian federalism is unambiguously in agreement with an institutional pacification, of which the division of the electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (with Brussels as bilingual, and Flemish Brabant as Dutch speaking) is a cornerstone. If the French speaking minority really wants this country, for which it nowadays enthusiastically waves the flag, to be cherished by the Dutch speaking majority, they themselves ought to give due respect to that majority. To rescue power from its vacuum and to end the deep crisis of democracy will take more than “five minutes of political courage”. For those in a position of responsibility it presupposes a vision that starts from the urgent need of political solidarity. It demands a power of persuasion that matches this. Solidarity entails a choice for the connection with the others. Without political solidarity, on the level of the government and the population, tolerant and democratic living together becomes impossible. Only the conscious choice for political solidarity will pull the country out of the present vacuum.

We are advocating a democratic and rational approach of the ever more hopeless Belgian crisis. We can no longer accept the fact that the reasonableness of democracy is allowed to prevail all over Europe, with the exception of Belgium. We are neither demanding land, nor money or power. We are referring to principles that must result in more democracy.

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